



RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR
235 Promenade Street, Room 425
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

July 29, 2020

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney
Chairman
House Finance Committee
The State House, Room 35
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: 2020 Beach, Clean Water and Green Economy Bond

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the Finance Committee:

If we did not already see that our public lands – our state parks, beaches, and campgrounds and our wildlife refuges, open spaces, and hiking trails – were vital to Rhode Islanders, we cannot miss it now. In this difficult time, amidst a pandemic, Rhode Islanders have been flocking to our parks, fishing piers, and green spaces. For example, despite COVID-related parking restrictions of 50 to 75 percent, Rhode Island's eight state beaches experienced a 79 percent increase in visitors in June 2020 (340,000 visitors) over June 2019 (190,000 visitors). Our partners at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island and Rhode Island Land Trust Council report that the refuges and trails they operate have never been more heavily used than in the past several months.

These places and public facilities provide intangibles that satisfy the soul – beauty, recreation, relief, normalcy. They also provide tangible benefits to our communities and our tourism sector. Parks, open green spaces, public access to clean waterways and the state programs needed to protect them are valuable and important to all of us. Of course, they also require stewardship and investment.

Today I am writing to urge your support of Governor Raimondo's proposed 2020 Beach, Clean Water and Green Economy Bond, including an additional \$5 million contained in Article 5 of H 7171, which is now under the Finance Committee's consideration. The proposed bond resolution truly invests in the best of Rhode Island. Historically, the projects capitalized by bond funding have protected the environment, supported economic development, strengthened our resiliency in the face of climate change, expanded and improved recreational facilities, and upgraded critical clean water infrastructure. In short, green bonds improve the lives of every Rhode Islander, and that is why Rhode Island voters have a long history of supporting environmental bonds. The \$47.3 million Green Economy and Clean Water Bond that you approved in 2018 passed with almost 79 percent of the vote that November.

The legislation proposes that a bond question be placed on the ballot approving a total investment of \$69 million, split into five major categories. Brief descriptions of each category are below.

State Beaches, Parks & Campgrounds: \$40 million to make a once-in-a-generation investment for major capital improvements to state beaches, parks, and campgrounds and to develop parkland on the former I-195 lands in Providence. Improvements will likely include new or upgraded facilities at Goddard Park beach, Roger Wheeler Beach, Scarborough State Beach, Misquamicut State Beach, Brenton State Park, and state campgrounds. Rhode Island's state park network attracts upwards of nine million visitors each year and hosts high-profile national and international events such as the Newport Folk and Jazz Festivals. They are an important contributor to the state's economy and ability to attract new people and businesses to Rhode Island. A recent study by URI demonstrated that each year our parks contribute an estimated \$312 million of economic output and support over 3,700 jobs. Out-of-state visitors spend \$89 million at restaurants and bars, \$76 million at gas stations, \$50 million at hotels and motels, and \$47 million at grocery stores. Furthermore, the proposed investment will provide a much-needed short-term economic boost by generating construction jobs. This proposed bond's investment in our beaches, campgrounds, and parks will fund needed improvements and ensure that our children and grandchildren can continue to enjoy the best Rhode Island has to offer.

Clean Water & Drinking Water: \$15 million in matching funds for the Clean and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds to ensure our drinking and recreational waters – including Narragansett Bay – are clean and safe. Matching funds will unlock close to \$74 million in federal funds and an additional \$175-\$250 million in private sector capital. This infusion will create jobs and support a variety of projects including drinking water and wastewater treatment upgrades, stormwater quality improvements, combined sewer overflow abatement projects, water distribution system upgrades, and repairs to aging sewers.

Local Recreation: \$4 million in matching grants to create new and improve existing community parks and recreation facilities. Studies show access to green space improves health, promotes stronger social ties, and enhances neighborhood satisfaction and pride. This spring and summer during the pandemic, these areas have grown in importance, providing some of the only relief to families looking to recreate close to home. "Local rec" grants are the most sought-after grants that DEM administers. In the most recent round of grants awards, in April, DEM received 55 qualified applications totaling more than \$13 million in requests but could fund fewer than half of the projects seeking grants. Since the inception of the program in 1988, DEM has awarded 519 grants totaling \$73 million in investments in all 39 of the state's cities and towns.

Natural and Working Lands: \$3 million to conserve farmland and forests. This program will protect farmland, enabling farmers to stay in business and keeping land productive. That supports our local food system and provides jobs. Since 2010, DEM has leveraged nearly 75 percent partner funding on farmland projects. This program also protects forested lands and the associated economic and ecosystem benefits. Rhode Island forests provide significant air quality benefits to the state, play an important role in keeping Rhode Island's waterways safe and clean, and sequester 500,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere each year. Rhode Island's forest-based recreation economy generates approximately \$375 million annually.

Municipal Resilience Program: \$7 million to help local communities restore and improve resiliency of vulnerable coastal habitats, rivers and stream floodplains, and infrastructure. This investment will fund matching grants up to 75 percent to directly support Rhode Island's cities and towns to identify top hazards, improve community resiliency, and strengthen public safety in the face of increased flooding and more frequent and more intense storm events driven by climate change. The Municipal Resilience Program has already succeeded in identifying strategies and providing action grants to implement projects in five communities. This funding will unlock additional resources for those communities and allow 20 additional municipalities to participate in the program over the next two years.

For these many benefits, to continue the historic progress that Rhode Island is making cleaning up Narragansett Bay and other waterways, to continue expanding recreational opportunities like playgrounds, bikeways, and soccer fields – assets that enrich all Rhode Islanders – and to ensure our state remains a healthy and attractive place to live, work, visit, and raise a family, I respectfully urge the Committee to approve the resolution and present to the Rhode Island voters the \$69 million Beach, Clean Water and Green Economy Bond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Janet Coit". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Janet" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Coit".

Janet Coit
Director